European journal of American studies
Reviews 2015-4

Carol Faulkner, Alison M. Parker eds. Interconnections: Gender and Race in American History

Helena Maragou

Electronic version
URL: http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/11149
ISSN: 1991-9336

Publisher
European Association for American Studies

Electronic reference
Helena Maragou, « Carol Faulkner, Alison M. Parker eds. Interconnections: Gender and Race in American History », *European journal of American studies* [Online], Reviews 2015-4, document 2, Online since 06 October 2015, connection on 19 April 2019. URL : http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/11149

Carol Faulkner, Alison M. Parker eds. Interconnections: Gender and Race in American History

Helena Maragou

1 *Interconnections* is a volume of essays that undertakes an interdisciplinary exploration of the intersections of race and gender as key constituents of American identity and American history. Part of the book series *Gender and Race in American History*, issued by the University of Rochester Press, this collection aims, in the words of editors Carol Faulkner and Alison M. Parker, to "bridge the gap between well-developed theories of race, gender, and power and the practice of historical research." To begin with, the volume focuses on race and gender identities as simultaneously and mutually constructed and confluent; for this reason, it deliberately "blurs the artificial boundaries between the scholarship of race, gender, and American politics and between the fields of African American history, women's history, and mainstream American history." Secondly, it brings into the study of race and gender empirical historical research, thus moving away from the field of abstract theorizing into study of specific historical contexts that both shape and are shaped by actual gender/race experiences of individuals and groups (from 19th and 20th-century historical events such as the westward expansion and the Great Depression, to transgenerational responses to citizenship, marriage, motherhood, and sexuality).

2 The theoretical premise on which *Interconnections* rests is the concept of "intersectionality," a term coined by race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) to suggest the interdependency of gender and race in identity construction, as well as the ways in which gender and race intersect with class, power, and privilege. According to Crenshaw, who developed this critical concept to study the experiences of African American women in the context of the American criminal justice system, personhood is a conglomerate of intersecting social experiences and identity markers, a fact conveniently disregarded by a legal system which fosters power hierarchies and various types of oppression, even as it expunges racist language and practice from its official operations. To the editors of *Interconnections*, intersectional analysis is an invaluable tool in the study of American history, because it allows us "to understand gender and racial identity—and sexism and racism—as always interacting," rather than exclusive categories, thus revealing ranges of intragroup diversity and varieties of structures of oppression. In the final analysis, what intersectional analysis reveals is the mutability and relativity of race, gender, and class as conceptual categories, a fact that becomes more than obvious in the case studies that comprise this volume.

3 *Interconnections* contains eight chapters that are divided into four thematic sections: "Bridging History, Theory, and Practice," "Frontiers of Citizenship," "Civil Rights and the Law," and "Sexuality, Class, and Morality." Together, these chapters move "the concept of intersectionality from the realm of dominant—yet methodologically underdeveloped—interdisciplinary theory to empirical historical research." Paying close attention to specific historical contexts and social experiences in 19th and 20th-century America, the authors in this volume explore intersections of race, gender, and class in the lives not only of African American women, but also Native American, white, and black men and women.

4 Part I comprises one chapter, titled "Historicizing Intersectionality as a Critical Lens: Returning to the Work of Anna Julia Cooper." Here, author Vivian M. May argues that in intersectional analysis, theory should support the practice of empirical research; this is because study of the interface of gender-race-class presupposes analysis of the

processes that construct personhood and hierarchies of privilege/oppression at given historical moments/sites. By suggesting the simultaneous construction of lived identities and structures of power, intersectional approaches, May points out, “entail a significant shift in epistemological, ontological, and methodological frames.” The latter explains why, according to her, “intersectional models of ‘both/and’ thinking and simultaneity” are frequently either underutilized or misunderstood: unfortunately, she says, “the ability to engage with a longer view of multiracial feminist theorizing and intellectual history is often stymied because our prevailing conceptual models of feminism and of theory remain both constrained and inflexible.”

5

May’s main claim is that, even though the term “intersectionality” was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, intersectionality as a theoretical premise has a long history in black feminist thought. May traces the genealogy of the concept to the work of Anna Julia Cooper, an internationally known African American feminist, educator, activist, and scholar whose writings at the turn of the century promoted a mode of inquiry now referred to as “intersectionality.” Cooper deployed intersectional analysis “to point to circumstances that she and her contemporaries found to be beyond utterance, such as black women’s experiences of sexual exploitation and physical trauma”; she also used it to bring to the fore “other forms of the unsaid,” such as absences in the scholarly record which were caused by racist and sexist bias. Through discussion of Anna Julia Cooper’s writings, May shows not only Cooper’s innovative vision, but also the extent to which this important black woman writer became herself a victim of “the legacy of exclusion.”

6

Part II of the volume, entitled “Frontiers of Citizenship” focuses on the intersections of race, gender, and citizenship in the context of 19th-century America. Rashauna Johnson’s “Laissez les bons temps rouler!” and Other Concealments: Households, Taverns, and Irregular Intimacies in Antebellum New Orleans,” provides a fascinating case study on the life and household a free woman of color in an ante-bellum New Orleans neighborhood. Johnson’s micro-level analysis of this site reveals a “microcosm in which frontier Louisiana’s hierarchies of race and gender conspired with cleavages of class and status to produce vastly different experiences for women of African descent.” To Johnson, what is most

significant about micro-level social histories such as this, is that they provide a lens that makes distinct the interface between local life and national politics, personal experience and broader ideological structures. In the process, Johnson manages to make the reader see the permeable and unstable boundaries of race, gender, and class.

7 In "'There are Two Great Oceans': The Slavery Metaphor in the Antebellum Women's Rights Discourse as Redescription of Race and Gender," Hélène Quanquin examines the slavery analogy deployed by white women reformers in the antebellum era, in order to highlight the subordination of white women both in the sphere of marriage and in the sphere of law and politics. Much as the slavery metaphor increased the momentum of the white women's abolitionist cause, Quanquin argues, "it erased the experience of one group, black women, including former slave women," for whom racist oppression and sexist exclusion were inextricable elements of daily life. Furthermore, white women's reform discourse obscured the privileges of race and class that white women possessed, thus "distorting the reality of slavery." According to Quanquin, even though the slavery analogy suggested a comparison of gender and racial oppression, its relegation of the actual experience of slavery to metaphorical discourse did not in fact "ensure the effective integration of both causes." Overall, Quanquin concludes, this discursive use of slavery shows "the impossibility of thinking about the intersections of race and gender without acknowledging the existence of simultaneous situations of oppression and privilege."

8 In the next chapter, entitled "'Grandpa Brown Didn't Have No Land': Race, Gender, and an Intruder of Color in Indian Territory," Kendra Taira Field presents the reader with a case study featuring Thomas Jefferson Brown, son of a black father and an Irish mother, who in the 1870s gained access to the Creek nation in Indian Territory in an attempt to realize his own American dream of land ownership and citizenship rights. Taking part in what Field refers to as "an American national project" of expansion, Brown managed to acquire land and citizenship rights in the Creek nation by marrying a Creek woman of African descent; however, by 1887 he and his family were dispossessed by the Dawes General Allotment Act, which determined Indian citizenship by "blood quantum," thus privileging "full bloods" and excluding "mixed-bloods." Field's personal investment in the story of Brown, who is in fact her

ancestor, instils into her chapter the element of human interest. Relying on archival research, but also on oral testimonies and storytelling, Field offers the reader a fascinating account of the paradoxes of race in contested borderlands, in which “black,” “Indian,” “American” were experienced as shifting and slippery identity markers—until the 1880s, which Field defines as a moment of transition, when “race eclipsed nation as a guarantor of rights and resources in the territory.” As Field successfully argues, Brown’s experiences in Indian Territory and Oklahoma reveal that “at the turn of the century, the United States was undergoing a seismic shift of self-definition from ‘nation’ to ‘race’ and from Indian and American national projects to black and white national projects.”

[9]

Part III, titled “Civil Rights and the Law,” focuses on gender and race in the context of the early 20th—century civil rights movement. In “Countable Bodies, Unaccountable Crimes: Sexual Assault and the Antilynching Movement,” Michele Kuhl investigates anti-lynching discourse to identify not only rhetorical strategies aimed to elicit public sympathy for the victims of lynching, but also telling omissions that reveal the limitations of the anti-lynching discourse. As Kuhl points out, at the turn of the century black bodies were subject to physical and sexual violence, because in the white dominant culture there was a widespread notion that “black men and women had excessively sexual natures.” The sexualization of black bodies accounts for the lack of legal protection of either black men who were lynched as alleged rapists, or of black women who were sexually assaulted by white men. In an attempt to counter the wave of mob violence against African American men and deconstruct the stereotype of the black rapist, turn-of-the-century activists deployed two effective rhetorical mechanisms: the first, “martyrdom discourse, grew out of black Christian theology that sacralized suffering to explain oppression”; the second, quoting of statistics, “flourished as social scientists increasingly looked to hard data to map the accusations that prompted lynching.” Together, these strategies undermined the validity of the claim that black men were sexual aggressors, while eliciting sympathy for the victims of lynching mobs. However, while managing to “redeem black manhood from the stereotype of bestial criminality,” anti-lynching discourse omitted references to sexual assaults suffered by black women, thus disassociating black

victimization and oppression from sexual violence against African American women. Kuhl concludes that in this matter “intersectional awareness did not translate into intersectional activism.”

10 In the next chapter, Meredith Clark-Wiltz’s “Persecuting Black Men and Gendering Jury Service: The Interplay between Race and Gender in the NAACP Jury Service Cases of the 1930s,” investigates another kind of silencing: the ways in which the NAACP’s campaign for black representation on juries in the 1930s obliterated black women’s legal presence. Clark-Wiltz examines three prominent cases in the NAACP’s jury service campaign to show that “interconnected understandings of race and gender undeniably shaped individual citizens’ access to the justice system and experiences of citizenship.” Through detailed references to the trial records, Clark-Wiltz convincingly argues that gender was central, both in black men’s citizenship claims, and in white men’s defense of the racial order: on the one hand, “black men relied on their own masculinity to lay claim to jury obligations as male citizens”; on the other, white men “associated jury service with white men’s protection of innocent white female victims.” As for NAACP, by resorting to gendered definitions of citizenship and justice, it rendered black women invisible by perpetuating the sexist stereotype of woman as passive and silent victim of crime. Clark-Wiltz concludes that the NAACP’s 1930s jury service campaign reveals “the effects that overlapping categories of gender and race had on individuals’ experiences with the justice system.” It also reveals how legal institutions operate in a way that displays ignorance “of the overlapping and often murky facets of individuals’ identities.”

11 The final part of the volume, entitled “Sexuality, Class, and Morality,” examines the ways in which gendered, sexualized, and racialized stereotypes intersect with discourses of morality. In “’A Corrupting Influence’: Idleness and Sexuality during the Great Depression,” Michele Mitchell presents tentative conclusions on a work-in-progress research project which focuses on a significant omission in the historical record of the Great Depression: the lives of unemployed and transient black women. Using the writings of lawyer and activist Pauli Murray as a resource, along with African American press articles, and Depression-era movies and books on transients, Mitchell investigates discourses of idleness that in the 1930s both

responded to and critiqued the escalating phenomenon of transiency. As she points out, “social workers, reformers, sociologists, activists, physicians, and ministers pointedly associated prolonged inactivity among idle youth, women, and men with increased alcohol consumption, delinquency, promiscuous behavior, mental instability, domestic discord, and desertion.” The discourses of idleness “were infused with potent racialized, gendered, and sexualized meanings for young black women and other youths alike.” Placing special emphasis on government camps as sites of diverse and intersecting experiences of gender, race and class, Mitchell unavoidably interprets race “in a fairly capacious manner,” thus producing a study that “is both about black women and *not* about black women.”

12

Deborah Gray White’s “What Women Want: The Paradoxes of Postmodernity as Seen through Promise Keeper and Million Man March Women” aims to explain the ways in which race and gender stereotypes informed women’s support of two highly conservative and male social movements of the 1990s. White argues that a comparison of the motives of white women who supported Promise Keepers (a predominantly white group) and of black women who supported the Million Man March (a black event), allows for an exploration of “the similar and different needs and desires of these black and white females.” The story behind both groups’ support of these two movements reveals women’s willing acceptance of their own subordination to male authority, which both groups expressed by voicing their condemnation of both feminism and homosexuality. As White argues, for the white Christian wives, resorting to traditional gender and sexual stereotypes operated as a coping mechanism that alleviated their anxiety over rising divorce rates among Christian couples; for black women, denunciation of homosexuality expressed a will to counter sexualized views of black people; at the same time, their support of the Million Man March was meant to empower male members of the family in assuming responsibility for their homes and communities. Concluding on the paradoxes that attend this surprising coalition between white and black women, White states that these two different groups of women had “more in common than we might suspect, beginning with the fact that their responses to their men’s organizing was calculated to help them cope with, and even overcome, the profound societal dislocations of the 1990s.”

13 The volume concludes with Carol Moseley Braun's "Gender and Race as Cultural Barriers to Black Women in Politics," which is the collection's "Epilogue." In her brief essay, Carol Moseley Braun, US Senator (1993-1999) and presidential candidate 2003-4, postulates that "in America, gender is more of a cultural barrier than is race." Using her own experience as ambassador to New Zealand and as presidential candidate, Braun expresses her view that in the arena of politics a black woman faces challenges that outweigh by far those that confront a black man, including those that concern lack of acceptance within her own community. This essay provides an appropriate ending to the collection; through the author's personal narrative of the ways in which gender, race, and class shape a black woman's career in politics, it foregrounds key dimensions of intersectionality.

14 *Interconnections* is an exemplary study of the interface of race, gender, and class during specific periods of American history and culture. Structured around the conceptual framework provided by intersectional analysis, this volume of essays never once deviates from the editors' professed aim, which is to "bridge the gap between well-developed theories of race, gender, and power and the practice of historical research." The case studies that inform every single one of the chapters reward the reader with a fresh (and refreshing) perspective on the ideological constructions and historical realities of race, class, and gender. What is most impressive about *Interconnections* is the vividness with which it exposes the multifariousness and complexity of experience that the confluence of race, gender, and class has produced in the history of America.

AUTHOR

HELENA MARAGOU

The American College of Greece